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ABSTRACT

In studying sociolinguistic rules, researchers must be aware of some guiding principles: that (1) these rules are below the conscious level of awareness, and (2) rules of speaking differ across cultural groups, with none being more correct than another. Even when members of different cultural groups interact in the same language they may find it difficult to interpret the intended meaning of their culturally different interlocutors. Because sociolinguistic rules of speaking are largely unconscious, we are rarely aware of their existence until they are broken, and then we often react negatively. The study of sociolinguistic rules of speaking can contribute information about the interaction process and the situations in which interlocutors negotiate their relationships with each other. A study of the dynamics of speech behavior among middle class speakers of American English reveals qualitative differences between behavior with intimates, status-unequals, and strangers on the one hand and with non-intimates, status-equal friends, co-workers, and acquaintances on the other. This supports the idea that the extremes of social distance call forth similar behavior, while relationships toward the center show marked differences. Understanding sociolinguistic relativity is an important factor in understanding diversity of speech behavior. A 31-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Intercultural communication and the analysis of conversation

Nessa Wolfson

From the editors: This paper was delivered as a keynote address at a conference on sociolinguistics in South Africa last Spring. In it Dr. Wolfson discusses the concept of sociolinguistic rules and how they vary across cultures, stressing that lack of knowledge of these rules can result in misunderstandings when people from different cultural backgrounds interact. She asserts that native speaker intuitions are unreliable indicators of such rules, and suggests means of investigating spoken interaction in ones own speech community. Finally, she reports on the results from some of her own research on complimenting in American English, comparing them to those of other researchers looking at other cultures.

Introduction

A major purpose of sociolinguistic analysis is to seek to learn how speech behavior is patterned in different societies. Because each society is different with respect to the rules and patterns of speech behavior, we must investigate the use of speech in specific societies or speech communities. Once we choose a particular speech community as the object of our investigation, we must, if we are to have valid analyses, collect data from the naturally occurring, everyday speech of men and women of differing ages, regions, social levels, ethnic backgrounds, and educational backgrounds as they use speech in differing situations and with different interlocutors.

As linguists we are used to thinking in terms of patterns and rules of language. When we come to sociolinguistic investigation, we find that very much the same principles are in operation as those we apply to the analysis of the sound system, the morphology, or the syntax of a language. Like sound patterns, sociolinguistic patterns are below the conscious level of awareness, needing careful and systematic analysis to provide valid descriptions. Like sound patterns, these sociolinguistic patterns have their features and their contrasts and their distribution. And, like sound patterns, sociolinguistic patterns differ from language to language, and from group to group.

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In studying sociolinguistic rules, or rules of speaking, as Dell Hymes has called them, we need to be aware of several guiding principles or axioms. The first is that they are indeed below conscious level of awareness. Thus, although we as community members or native speakers know the rules and use them, we do not have the ability to describe them, any more than we can describe our own phonological system without first having investigated it objectively. This is not to say that sociolinguistic rules have no reality, for they do. Simply, our intuitions do not tell us what they are.

What this means is that members of a given community, although perfectly competent in the uses and interpretation of the patterns of speech behavior which exist in their own groups, are, with the exception of a few explicitly taught formulas, not even aware of the patterned nature of their own speech behavior. That is, native speakers are very well able to judge the correctness and appropriateness of the speech behavior, so that when a rule is broken, when someone not fully socialized into the culture in question (such as a non-native speaker or a child) says something that is inappropriate, the native speaker recognizes the deviation and responds to it in whatever way seems most reasonable under the circumstances. Children are frequently corrected, even by strangers. Non-native speakers, depending on their level of proficiency and on the relationship of the interlocutors, will sometimes be corrected, sometimes negatively judged.

However, what native speakers are not able to do with any degree of accuracy is to describe their own rules of speaking. It has been demonstrated many times that when native speakers are asked to explain or to identify forms which they or others in their community use in a given speech situation, their responses do not necessarily coincide with speech behavior which is actually observed and recorded.

This discrepancy between norms and behavior is readily seen in the study of speech acts. In responding to questions about how they go about giving invitations, for example, the native speakers of American English sampled by Wolfson, D'Amico-Reisner and Huber (1983) described themselves as using forms which were rarely or never heard in observations of actual interactions, and expressed strong disapproval of forms which they were heard to use all the time. If the researchers had chosen to investigate the forms used in giving invitations by asking speakers of middle class American English what they would say in a given situation, the data collected in this way would not have corresponded well with that which was gathered through the observation and recording of the spontaneous speech of the same group.

Although it has been proved again and again that native speaker opinions concerning language use are frequently quite inaccurate, this fact is not easy to

accept. Even researchers and people who have had wide experience in language teaching are often resentful of the idea that they themselves are not really conscious of how they speak. Many reject the notion entirely and insist that they are perfectly capable, as native speakers, of instructing their students in sociolinguistic rules. Others rely for their research on the responses of other native speakers for information about the forms people use in certain specific situations without recognizing that the intuitions of other native speakers are neither better nor worse than their own.

It is important for sociolinguists to acknowledge that members of a given speech community tend to have strong (though often mistaken) opinions concerning their own speech behavior and are frequently disbelieving and even angry when these opinions are shown to be inaccurate. Knowing themselves to be competent users of their language(s), most people, including language teachers, make the assumption that they know exactly what they do and do not say in a given situation.

In actual fact, speakers do have strong and well-formed ideas about what they *should* say, but this is not at all the same as knowing what they *do* say. Speech norms, or community ideals concerning appropriate speech behavior, is not at all the same as actual speech use which is the behavior itself. The first principle of sociolinguistic investigation, then, is that native speaker intuitions are very limited and do not provide a valid basis upon which to build a description of the actual patterns that exist in the day to day speech of community members.

Before leaving the topic of native speaker intuition, it needs to be pointed out that while often inadequate with respect to our ability to report what we say and how we say it, our intuitions are unquestionably valuable and important in many ways. For the sociolinguist, it is critical to understand that although we do not have the ability to describe even our own speech use objectively, we often have useful insights into the meanings behind various types of expression. We know a great deal about what is appropriate in different sorts of interactions, and we can bring this knowledge to the analysis of patterns of use, once we have a good collection of examples of speech used in spontaneous daily interactions. What is important to remember is that while our intuitions as native speakers are far from adequate to the description of sociolinguistic rules, we would be completely unable to make sense of these rules if we had no intuitions at all. Inadequacy is not the same as absence of knowledge. We do not know enough about the way language is used, but this does not mean that we do not know a great deal.

Sociolinguistic diversity and its consequences

The second principle of sociolinguistic investigation of face-to-face interaction is that rules of speaking are far from universal across cultural groups. What this means is that each society has its own set of patterns and that these are different from group to group. Just as each language has its own phonological system, so each speech community has its own rules of speaking. This principle, which I call sociolinguistic relativity, has three important corollaries:

1) First, each community has its own rules, conventions, and patterns for the conduct of communication, .and these are part of a general system that reflects the values and structure of the society or group.

2) It follows from this first corollary that no two societies or communities are ever completely alike with respect to sociolinguistic patterns, just as no two languages have the same phonemic inventories.

3) Third, and most important from the point of view of intercultural communication, we must acknowledge that no society has a monopoly on correct sociolinguistic behavior. Lack of knowledge of the rules of speaking of interlocutors from other cultural backgrounds can lead to breakdowns in communication. However, when speakers recognize that it is normal for cultures to differ in this respect, such miscommunication problems can be overcome. It is only when people are convinced that their own rules are somehow the only rules, that we encounter the kind of negative stereotyping that can do serious, and perhaps irreparable damage.

Sociolinguistic studies, particularly those conducted within the framework of the ethnography of speaking, first put forth by Hymes (1962) provide striking evidence that speech communities vary, sometimes dramatically, in the ways in which they make use of their linguistic resources to perform social functions.

Thus, the norms and values which inform speakers" knowledge as to what is appropriate to say to whom and under which conditions, show considerable variation from community to community around the world, not only from one language group to another, but within language groups as well. This phenomenon, sociolinguistic relativity, has important implications for intercultural communication.

Most people recognize that languages are different from one another in such areas as phonology, syntax and lexicon. When people learn a new language, they expect to have to learn new rules of pronunciation and grammar and to memorize a new vocabulary. What is often not taken into account, however, is that the individual

who wishes to acquire the ability to interact effectively with native speakers of a new language, must also learn the rules of speaking of the speech community that uses it.

With regard to intercultural misunderstanding, the problem is twofold. To begin with, people coming from different sociocultural backgrounds tend to have very different value systems and these are manifested in speech as well as in other sorts of social behavior. These differences often lead to misunderstanding. This diversity in value systems and in the ways in which these are expressed is usually not well understood.

When people coming from different backgrounds interact, they tend to judge each other's behavior according to their own value systems. The more we know about other cultures, the more we are able to recognize that being different is not a question of being better or worse - it is merely a question of being different. This principle, is usually referred to as cultural relativity. When we extend this principle to the evaluation of sociolinguistic rules, we may refer to it as sociolinguistic relativity.

The adoption of a sociolinguistically relativistic point of view is probably the single most important means of reducing the negative results of the inevitable misunderstandings that emerge when people interact across cultures. But in order to adopt this perspective, we must first understand how sociolinguistic diversity manifests itself. Some illustrations of the kinds of differences that exist and of reactions to these differences, will help to clarify the situation.

Appropriate speech usage within the context of a given society is inculcated in early childhood as part of the socialization process. For this reason, it is so linked to such attributes as good manners, honesty, sincerity and good character generally, that it is often difficult for people to accept the notion that differences along these lines is merely a reflection of different cultural backgrounds..

If there is anything at all that may be said to be universal about rules of speaking, it is the tendency for members of one speech community to judge the speech behavior of others by their own standards. It is exactly this lack of knowledge about sociolinguistic diversity which lies at the root of most intercultural misunderstanding.

It often happens that people from many different cultural backgrounds share knowledge of what is thought of as a single language, for example, English. When they interact, using English as their medium of communication, they assume that they are speaking the same language. However, if their sociolinguistic rules are different, as they often are in these situations, it may well be that they are in fact, not really speaking the same language at all..

Since *how* people speak is part of *what* they say, members of a different cultural groups interacting in the same language, may well find themselves in the position of being unable to interpret the meaning of what their culturally different interlocutors say to them, even though all the vocabulary is quite familiar. With no other frame of reference at their disposal, such speakers have little choice but to interpret what they hear according to the rules of speaking of their own native speech communities. And since the rules are very likely to be quite different, misunderstandings are almost inevitable. The result may be amusement or contempt, but it is just as likely to be annoyance, shock, or even serious insult.

One example of the way in which seemingly trivial differences in sociolinguistic patterns may have serious consequences involves the expression of approval. Americans customarily give compliments with far greater frequency and in a far wider range of speech situations than is common in most other cultures.

In cross-cultural encounters, other English speakers are often surprised by the American custom of praising belongings, accomplishments and appearance. As a result, they may react by regarding Americans with mistrust. In situations when they receive the sort of compliments which are a frequent aspect of interactions among Americans, English speakers from other sociocultural groups may interpret these compliments as effusive, insincere, and possibly motivated by ulterior considerations.

Because sociolinguistic rules of speaking are very largely unconscious, we are rarely aware of their existence unless they are brought to our attention through the shock of having them broken. When it happens that others do break our sociolinguistic rules, we often react negatively. Tolerance of sociolinguistic violations is uncommon precisely because the rules are so much a part of unconscious expectations concerning proper behavior. People do not normally take offense or make negative character judgments when someone from another dialect area pronounces a word differently or when unexpected vocabulary choices are made; indeed, such differences as those which result in a a different accent are often found very charming. Errors in rules of speaking, however, are a very different matter. An inappropriate question or the failure to voice an expected apology, or compliment, or congratulation, will not be judged as a difference in communicative style owing to intercultural dissimilarity, but rather, as a personal affront.

Reactions to violations of sociolinguistic rules are negative and even quite harsh because most individuals take their own behavior patterns for granted and are unaware that rules of speaking are far from universal. Yet, in every society there are some things that are simply not said or asked, others that are absolutely required in

certain situations, and it is assumed that every well brought up person knows these rules of behavior. Each speech community has, as part of its collective wisdom, the unquestioned assumption that its own ways of speaking are the correct, proper, honest and good ways. For this reason, even people whose occupations lead them to interact frequently with people of different cultural backgrounds are prone to regard sociolinguistic rule-breaking as a manifestation of a flawed character, and if they have had what they see as negative experiences with numerous members of a particular group, they are apt to stigmatize everyone who belongs to it.

Speaking in 1990, when the use of English has spread to the point where approximately half its speakers are non-native, one would not want to suggest that the kind of miscommunication just described is limited to interactions between native speakers. As we know very well, there are large numbers of people who, while not native speakers, nevertheless have an excellent command of English and use it regularly in the course of their daily lives. Quite apart from the millions of immigrants to English speaking countries, there are considerable proportions of English speaking people in all the nations that have adopted English as an official or an additional language.

Each English speaking group has its own rules of speaking. When a language becomes accepted as an institutionalized second language and is used for purposes of national communication, it is to be expected that the sociolinguistic patterns of the speech community using it will be reflected in this tongue just as they are in the native tongue(s). As Akere (1982: 97) puts it in describing Nigerian English:

> What has happened here in Nigeria . . . and in other places where some cultural assimilation of the English language has taken place (say for example, in India) is that the resources of a second language are superimposed on an intricate system of social and kinship relationships, and on a completely different pattern of cultural outlook and social expectations. The differences in cultural outlook and social expectations between British society, on the one hand and indigenous Nigerian cultures, on the other hand, become quite obvious in the resulting pattern of address forms and greetings that characterize Nigerian English. . The intracultural variations in the uses of these linguistic forms in Nigerian English may be assumed to be systematically related to the constituents of subculture patterns. These include aspects of the social structure, cultural definitions of the situation of action, respect and deference in social relationships, the cultural philosophy and the value system, and their patterned interrelations.

What all this means in terms of sociolinguistics is that communicative competence in the English language could mean many things, depending on the identity of the speakers. As we pointed out in speaking of our second principle,

different native speaking communities have different rules of speaking, just as they have different phonological rules, and therefore the model, when it comes to sociolinguistic behavior, cannot be thought of in terms of the English language as a whole, but rather in terms of the various speech communities that use it.

To come back to our original point, we must recognize that the phenomenon that we are calling sociolinguistic relativity is a very difficult concept to accept, and that differences in communicative or sociocultural conventions are all too often interpreted as intentional rudeness. Indeed, some people who communicate across cultural groups are never able to reconcile themselves to such differences or to accept the possibility that the differences they encounter are not that between behavior that is right or wrong, but between different norms or rules of behavior.

Investigating Spoken Interaction

When we turn to sociolinguistic analyses for information that will enable us to avoid miscommunication across cultures, we are immediately confronted with the fact that there are many unresolved problems to be worked out. We must be clear about whose rules of speaking are being studied, and how far we can generalize from what has been learned so far. Further, we must be aware that sociolinguistics is a young field and that although a great deal has been done, we are very far from being able to write anything approaching a grammar of sociolinguistic rules for any group.

To provide an example of the kinds of insights that may be gained by the analysis of rules of speaking, I want to report on a study of my own which has to do with the social dynamics of speech behavior among middle class speakers of American English.

The purpose of this research report is twofold. First, I want to describe how the study of sociolinguistic rules of speaking can contribute information about the interaction process and the situations in which interlocutors negotiate their relationships with one another. Second, I want report on a theory of my own concerning the way interaction is patterned within the general middle class American speech community.

The choice of looking at speech behavior in the researcher's own speech community should be understood to be purposeful and critical to the analysis. Native speaker insights can be an extremely useful aid in the interpretation of the data. This is especially true since the objective of the investigation was to cast light on the speech

behavior of the researcher's own social group: the present-day American urban middle class, and what this behavior reflects about the structure of this society.

One way in which sociocultural insights may be gained through the study of rules of speaking is to focus on the way what is said is conditioned by the social identities and the relationships of the speakers. By analyzing the data in this way, we learn who has the right or the obligation to invite, to compliment,or to scold, for example, and who has the obligation to greet, to thank, or to apologize. By investigating the way speech behavior reflects the rights and obligations of community members, we can learn a great deal about how the society is structured.

If we take a somewhat different perspective, examining the relationship of speech act form, or degree of elaboration used, to the identity of the interlocutors, we can often gain insights into something much more subtle and difficult to characterize - the social strategies people in a given speech community use to accomplish their purposes - to gain cooperation, to form friendships and to keep their world running smoothly.

When we look first at the way what is said reflects cultural values, it is apparent that the most informative. kinds of speech behavior are, like compliments, thanks and apologies, of a type that reflect an implicit or explicit assessment on the part of the speaker.. In the United States, middle class English speakers compliment one another on belongings or appearance or performance; they thank or apologize for an action. The topics of these speech acts are not necessarily stated explicitly, but they must at least be understood so that they can be inferred from the context. At the other end of the speech act spectrum, we have greetings and partings, which are spoken specifically to mark beginnings and ends, openings and closings of encounters, and which do not necessarily contain evidence of cultural values in themselves. Between the two, we have invitations, which, like greetings, focus on social interaction in and of itself. Because they have to do with planning and commitment to specific activities, invitations do often give us information about the kinds of social events that different groups within the community are likely to participate in, and even about which kinds of activities are planned as opposed to spontaneous or taken for granted.

In many speech communities around the world, it is normal for friends, family and neighbors to visit without any announcement at all and certainly without an explicit invitation. In other speech communities, specifically in large complex urban societies, even a short visit to the home of another member of the family or to a close friend requires an invitation, or, at the minimum, a telephoned self-invitation. Clearly,

the kinds of invitations which the researcher might collect in two such different speech communities would be very different in type and in distribution.

Using the same body of data about invitations, and focusing on the social identities of participants, rather different insights come forth. In this respect, speech behavior of all types may be equally informative. Thus, if we are interested in analyzing what the rights, obligations and privileges of speakers are vis a vis one another, or of who engages in which speech act with whom and in which situations, we can probably learn as much from studying greetings, partings and invitations as we can from analyzing thanks, apologies and compliments. And most revealing of all, if we examine the forms people use spontaneously with different interlocutors, we frequently find that the degree of elaboration corresponds not only to speakers' roles and expectations, but also to the manipulation of roles and to the formation or re-affirmation of relationships.

The Bulge: A theory of social interaction

A case in point is a consistent finding of mine that there is a qualitative difference between the speech behavior that middle class Americans use to intimates, status unequals, and strangers on the one hand, and to non-intimates, status-equal friends, co-workers, and acquaintances on the other. I call this theory *the Bulge* because of the way the frequencies of certain types of speech behavior plot out on a diagram with the two extremes showing very similar patterns, as opposed to the middle section which displays a characteristic bulge.

Put differently, when we investigate the ways in which different speech acts occur in ordinary everyday speech, and when we compare these behaviors in terms of the social relationships of the interlocutors, we find again and again that the two extremes of social distance -- minimum and maximum - seem to call forth very similar behavior, while relationships which are more toward the center show marked differences.

At first glance, this finding may appear bizarre and even counterintuitive. Why should people who are intimates behave the same way as those who are status unequals or strangers? What could these opposite relationships have in common that is not shared by non-intimates, status-equal friends, co-workers, and acquaintances? Why should there be a sharp contrast between people's behavior to their peers and their behavior to everyone else? The explanation lies in the extreme mobility of the American social system. What is important is the relative stability of relationships at

the two extremes of the social distance continuum in contrast with the instability of those in the center. Put in other terms, the more status and social distance are seen as fixed, the easier it is for speakers to know what to expect of one another. In a complex urban society in which speakers may belong to a variety of social groups, relationships among speakers are often very uncertain. These relationships among status equal friends and acquaintances are dynamic, and open to negotiation. There is freedom here but not security. The emergent and relatively insecure nature of these relationships is reflected in the care people take to signal solidarity and to avoid confrontation.

For example, although compliments in the United States are exchanged between intimates and between total strangers, the great majority *(the bulge)* take place within interactions between speakers who are neither intimates nor strangers..

There is considerable evidence for the validity of the bulge theory in the work of sociolinguists over the past several years. Some examples are the work done by Holmes on apologies; by Eisenstein and Bodman on the expression of gratitude; by Beebe on refusals; by D'Amico-Reisner on the expression of disapproval; by Rabinowitz on offers; and by Boxer on indirect complaints. What these studies demonstrate is that this pattern holds for every analysis of speech acts among speakers of American English so far examined

For the purposes of this discussion, I will draw on analyses of data from several English speaking communities. Confirmation of the validity of *the bulge* theory has recently emerged in the work of three separate investigators, all working independently on the speech behavior associated with compliments. In my own most recent work, I have been engaged in collecting and analyzing data not only on the speech act of complimenting, but on the speech sequence which includes the responses to compliments as well. While Manes (1983) has reported on some of our earliest findings regarding compliment responses, and our original joint work included the collection of responses along with the compliments that initiated them, it is only since 1985 that I myself began to focus specifically on the entire complimenting sequence as a speech event which might yield new and important insights into the underlying motivation of this aspect of speech behavior. My findings so far indicate that the compliment/response sequence is a negotiated one in which two or more participants are involved in an often elaborated exchange.

In the earliest of our joint reports on compliments (Manes & Wolfson, 1980; Wolfson & Manes, 1980) we suggested that the function of the act was to create or reaffirm solidarity. My own most recent work as well as that of others (Herbert, 1986;

Holmes, 1987) has verified this hypothesis and provided additional results which add considerable depth and breadth to it.

Thus, Herbert (1986) reports on his analysis of a corpus of 1,062 compliment responses, both spontaneous and experimental, collected at the State University of New York at Binghamton. In a systematic investigation of the responses given by the native speakers of American English sampled, Herbert focused on the frequency of occurrence with which compliments were and were not accepted by addressees. His findings are striking in that speakers were "almost twice as likely to respond with some response other than *acceptance*. " (Herbert ,1986:80). As Herbert points out, this finding disagrees with the societal norm requiring that compliments be accepted with thanks.

Herbert raises the question of whether native speakers of other varieties of English follow similar behavior patterns. Basing his analysis on data collected in South Africa, he finds that patterns of acceptances were very different. Indeed, Herbert finds that "*acceptances* . . . accounted for fully seventy-six percent of the South African responses. That is, in place of the approximately one-in-three likelihood of receiving an *acceptance* response from an American speaker, the likelihood is three-in-four among English-speaking South Africans."

In a later paper (Herbert and Straight, 1986) the authors posit an explanation for this phenomenon, pointing out that social stratification is intrinsic to South African ideology. Thus, the paucity of compliments given by South Africans in contrast to the frequency with which they occur in the speech of Americans, along with the fact that Americans tend to reject and the South Africans to accept compliments, has to do with the social systems in which the two groups interact. They point out that Americans give compliments frequently because they are attempting to establish solidarity in a social context in which their own status is uncertain. For the same reason, Americans tend not to accept the compliments they receive, thus further working toward the building of solidarity by stressing equality with their interlocutors. South Africans, in contrast, function in a society in which solidarity with status-equals is assumed, and have no need to make use of compliment negotiations to establish what they already have - certainty as to their relationships with one another. Thus, the analysis put forward by Herbert (1986) and by Herbert and Straight (1986) fits neatly within the framework of the Bulge theory, supporting it through their evidence and their explanation of why Americans and South Africans differ so sharply in their behavior regarding compliment/response sequences.

explanation of why Americans and South Africans differ so sharply in their behavior regarding compliment/response sequences.

In her report of compliment response behavior in New Zealand, Holmes (1989) reports that "it is relatively rarely that New Zealanders overtly reject compliments." Holmes' ethnographic study, which includes a corpus of 484 New Zealand compliment/response sequences, yields many significant findings. Although she does not discuss the underlying ideology which may lead to this speech behavior from the same point of view as that addressed by Herbert (1986) or by Herbert and Straight (1986) it is very possible that New Zealand society, like that in the United States, is sufficiently lacking in stratification to cause speakers to behave in similar ways for similar reasons.

From the point of view of the theory under consideration, the most significant point to be taken from Holmes' study is the clear finding that most New Zealand compliments occur within what I have called the Bulge, thus lending further independent support to this analysis.

Sex-Related Differences in Speech Behavior

It should be mentioned that while I have continued to investigate sex-related differences in compliment/response behavior, both Herbert (in press) and Holmes (1989) have conducted independent studies along the same lines. What is most impressive about the findings and the analyses reported to date is the high degree of convergence in all three studies. That is, it is clear from all three reports that women not only give and receive more compliments than men do, but that their responses indicate that this speech activity functions differently among men and women, with women making far greater use of such compliment/response strategies to create and reaffirm solidarity. The fact that all three studies indicate similar patterns among women as opposed to men may well lead to some significant refinements of the Bulge theory reflecting the status-related social strategies of women.

In my own analysis, I have found that elaborated responses occur in the speech of both intimate and status-unequal females, but that the great majority of lengthy sequences are to be found in conversations among status-equal acquaintances.

An example of the kind of elaborated sequences I have found to be typical in compliment behavior among status equal women is the following exchange:

The context is one in which two female colleagues are discussing the interviewing and hiring of an employee by one of them (B) who has just said that she feels a bit uncertain about her choice.

A: You're an incredibly good judge of people.
B: Really? I never thought of myself that way.
A: Well, you are. You're always right. I've never found you to miss except maybe for a little wrinkle or two. But I'd rank you right up there with X and I've always thought she was the best I'd seen.
B: You just haven't seen the mistakes I've made.
A: I don't think you give yourself enough credit. When I first came here and you warned me to look out for D. I didn't believe you. But you were right and if I'd listened, I'd have saved myself a lot of problems.
B: Well, that one stuck way out -- anyone could have told you the same thing.
A: That's what you think. Plenty of people, including your good friend Y, are completely taken in by D.
B: That's an unusual situation. She plays up to Y -- doesn't treat him the same way she does everyone else.
A: Okay, maybe not. But your assessment of our new director of Blank was incredible. You saw him in a couple of meetings and you told me exactly what to expect. You couldn't have been more right. And I've seen you do it -- peg people right off -- more times than I can remember. You can deny it all you want, but you've got a real talent about seeing through people. I'd go with your judgment any day.
B: I think you're overestimating me. I'm wrong plenty of times and I certainly don't feel very secure about my ability to judge in this situation.
A: Well, I'll be glad to meet your candidate and let you know what I think if it'll make you feel any better.

And a second example:

Middle class white female colleagues in work-related exchange:

A: What's it about?
B: It's in reference to one of the papers in my book.
A: I love your book. I think it's terrific. Remember, I reviewed it for XYZ Journal and I said how good it was. Everybody thinks so.
B: Well, it's nice of you to say so, but I think the second half could have been a lot stronger. There are some really good papers in that section but there are some weak ones too.
A: It's still the best thing there is out on the subject.

B: Well, that's because there isn't much out yet. The field's too new. But I think the book I just finished will be a whole lot better. I'm really pleased with it.
A: From what I say, it looks terrific. I can't wait till it comes out so I can start using it. How long is it?
B: A little less than six hundred pages if you count in the references and index.
A: Six hundred pages! It turned out to be that long? You really are amazing. I don't know how you do it.

Clearly, this degree of elaboration, the repeated pattern of compliment, challenge, and justification, is reflective of a sociocultural value system and an interactional style that demands further attention since it goes to the heart of the entire issue of speech behavior and social dynamics.

Thus, the findings from the ethnographic studies discussed above all converge in revealing a qualitative difference between the speech behavior which middle class Americans use with intimates, status unequals and strangers, on the one hand, and with non-intimates, status-equal friends, co-workers and acquaintances on the other. With respect to the frequency with which a particular speech act or sequence occurs, the degree of elaboration used in performing it, and the amount of negotiation which occurs between interlocutors, the two extremes of social distance show very similar patterns as opposed to the middle section, which displays a characteristic bulge.

The fact that urban middle class Americans live in a complex and open society means that individuals are members not of a single social network in which their own place is well defined, but rather belong to a number of different social networks, both overlapping and non-overlapping, in which they must continually negotiate their roles and relationships with one another. The importance of the bulge theory lies in what it tells us about how the very openness and potential for mobility of American middle class society is reflected in our everyday speech behavior. The fact that very similar findings have emerged in research on complimenting behavior in New Zealand (Holmes 1987, 1989), as well as the report of very different behavior patterns among native speakers of South African English (Herbert and Straight in press) provides additional evidence for the analysis presented here.

Thus we see that a major contribution to the study of speech behavior is that by examining it in the social context in which it occurs, we are able to analyze patterns of social behavior and to gain insights into deep cultural values.

Conclusion

Much more work in the analysis of sociolinguistic rules remains to be done before we are in a position to make the kinds of contrasts that would lead to a full understanding of sociolinguistic relativity.and of the diversity of speech behavior upon which it is based. It is only by investigating the variety of such patterns that we may come to appreciate. the creativity with which speakers make use of their own unconscious patterns in order to accomplish the work of ongoing social interaction.

This is not to suggest that what already exists in the sociolinguistic literature is not valuable both in itself and for what it can offer us with respect to insights, information, and inspiration for further research. Much of what remains to be done will, I hope, come from students who, seeing the need and the value of the work, will devote their time and energy to adding to the description of the rules of speaking among different speech communities around the world -- descriptions that are necessary if we are to comprehend and enhance communication across cultures.

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